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VII.—THE ARGUMENT OF THE *VISION OF PIERS PLOWMAN.*

The fourteenth century was for England a period of storm and stress. The Saxon genius does not achieve its conquests lightly ; it does not march to victory with furled flags or muffled drums ; it is profoundly conscious of its own effort and the object to be realized. True, it often attains more than it hopes or even knows ; but it attains the larger result through the accomplishment of the immediate purpose. The internal struggles are those that cost, with nations as with men ; and it is no small part of the greatness of England that she has been able to see and strong to resist those dangers which, rising from within, have threatened to overthrow that stability which outward foes have in vain assailed. In that century which marked the close of the middle ages and the beginning of the modern era, England was busy taking cities and ruling her own spirit, and only the wise knew which was the better.

Of the kings who ruled during nearly the entire century, from 1307 to 1399, two were deposed ; the third, after one of the longest and most brilliant reigns in the national history, died an imbecile, not even a figure-head in the government ; but before his death, his ministers were removed and his mistress was banished. What in those days was called "the chaste voice of the people," and in our time has been named "the non-conforming conscience," was for the first time seriously, effectively, permanently protesting against "wickedness in high places."

Parliament, previously an unstable, inorganic assemblage of the nobility, convened at the will of the king, became a representative body, summoned and elected in a definite manner, and at frequent, if not always regular, intervals. The clergy ceased to be an integral part of the national assembly, and

retired into convocation or resigned their interests into the hands of the lords spiritual sitting in the upper house. The division of the two houses, in much the same manner as now, was permanently effected in 1341, after many temporary trials; and the commons, from being unwilling representatives of shires and towns which grudged the expenses necessary to sending men to ratify taxes imposed by the king, became the dictators of the national policy. The knights of the shires and the burgesses, brought into intimate relations through their connection in parliament, united to form a middle class, even in its incipency effective against the dominance of an aristocracy of birth, and destined in its development to become the chief bulwark of the nation.

Despite their name, the commons were exclusively from the gentry and that which we have since learned to call the upper-middle class; but the decisive step was taken when the first burgesses were summoned. The march has been slow and painful; inch by inch, almost man by man, the multitude *infra classem* have won their right to recognition; but the conquest is not yet complete. Of the two lessons which Christianity came to teach the world, perhaps the easier is that of the fatherhood of God; at least, to the popular mind, it is attended by less embarrassing corollaries than those derived from the brotherhood of man. That has proved a hard doctrine, and the learning has been no easy task. Its lessons were enforced on the English nation by a series of calamities that mark the fourteenth century as one of peculiar trouble and disquiet.

The famine of 1316, especially severe among the artisan and agricultural classes, seriously disturbed the labor market and struck the first blow against the ancient system of villeinage. The visitation of the Black Death, 1348-9, still further effected the emancipation of the serfs, and shook them free from inherited bondage to the soil on which they were born. They were not slow to perceive the advantage so painfully procured; they heard their marching orders, and, unconscious

of their destination, almost to a man they moved on. Parliamentary statutes and royal proclamations had no effect in recalling the day of old things when once the new dawn had come ; and the struggle between capital and labor that marked the first outbreak of the Black Death culminated in the Peasants' Revolt, inconclusive, ineffective, abortive as to immediate result, but mighty in its significance and of unending import, if judged by its ultimate effects.

While England was thus working out her salvation, not without the inevitable fear and trembling, external events were determining her course and shaping her destiny. The wars with France roused the national desire to travel and to traffic, and gave an impetus to English commerce. Merchants became for the first time an appreciable force in public life, bringing home from their voyages wealth to which even the king paid homage, and, what was perhaps as important, contributing to the general stock many novel ideas. The country succumbed to a panic of foreign fashions which reached deeper than the visible tokens of dress and manners. Soldiers of all classes found their horizons broadened by camping on French fields and sallying across Spanish frontiers ; and lord and laborer alike were as unwilling as they were unable to resume their home life where they left it. The brilliant victories of the Black Prince occasioned a burst of pride and patriotism which waned under the ensuing series of disheartening defeats and unimportant conquests ; and by the end of the century England was forced back into that insularity essential to the development of individual character.

The national spirit formed, modified, strengthened by these and other causes, found its place of action in a struggle for which the times were now ripening. The English people, while acknowledging the spiritual supremacy of the Roman church, had long resisted, although with intermittent and often ineffective effort, the political and especially the financial claims of the hierarchy. As the feeling of nationality increased, the spirit of resistance grew stronger and more conscious. During

the latter part of the century, the burden of taxation pressed sore upon the people; the expenses of the foreign wars and the extravagance of the court called for frequent renewals of the royal exchequer, to each of which the nation responded with increasing irritation, until at last the poll tax of 1380 and the hateful method of its enforcement gave immediate cause to the Peasants' Revolt. To a people thus harassed and galled, the papal exactions, enforced by foreign legates, appeared an intolerable oppression; and the authority of the church which controlled the keys of heaven and hell could with difficulty turn the keys of plebeian coffers. The demand of Urban V, in 1366, for the arrears of the annual tribute promised by John, marked a crisis in this popular discontent, and parliament defiantly sent back the refusal of the people. Another and even more obnoxious oppression was that exerted by the multiplicity of ecclesiastical courts. Papal law claimed supremacy over the law of the land; and while "benefit of clergy" freed the vast numbers of ecclesiasts from judgment in the common courts, the laity were subjected to a legal tyranny from which they had no appeal except to the source of power, the Roman hierarchy.

The removal of this central force of Christendom from the holy city, around which the reverence of centuries had woven a shroud of awe and mystery, was a fatal blow to the Roman hold on England. With cruel distinctness the light of common day struck down upon the papal court of Avignon; and the pope, formerly considered a great power neutral to political and national questions, engrossed only in maintaining a spiritual dominion, was judged an ally of France, a partisan in an international struggle. Nor did the return from Avignon strengthen the weakened bonds. The ensuing schism strained the respect and veneration of even the most orthodox nations, among which England was fast losing her right to be counted. Christianity became a two-headed monster, each head "breathing out threatenings and slaughter" against the

other, and finally inciting to a "holy" war to be waged within that body already sorely divided against itself.

Causes nearer at hand and in themselves less important had already roused the Saxon moral sense. The church had fallen on evil days; the gulf between clerical practice and pretension had increased, until hardly the blindest faith could ignore the chasm. The avarice of the landed clergy, the immorality of the mendicant orders, the indifference of the dignitaries,—these were the subjects of the bitterest and most open satire to which the English tongue has ever turned. They were written in English, French, and Latin, and in a macaroni of all three; they were sung by wandering gleemen, and polished by the careful pens of court poets; they were familiar to all classes, and moved to laughter or wrath according to the natures of their makers and their hearers. Again was heard "the chaste voice of the people," this time in protest against the exponents of a church to whose sanctity and authority faith still clung. Already there was a voice in this wilderness of distrust and unrest, crying to make straight a new path. Few heard the message; the hope of those who hoped at all lay in straightening the old crooked roads and smoothing the old rough places.

This hope, often more melancholy than despair, found expression in a work which gathered into itself and reflected through the personality of its author the confused and diverse elements of English middle class life in the fourteenth century.

The Vision of Piers Plowman—since the first printed edition by Robert Crowley, in 1550, the accepted title of a poem more imposingly styled in manuscript, *Liber de Petro Plowman*, with two sub-divisions, *Visio Willelmi de Petro le Plowman* and *Vita de Dowel Dobet et Dobest secundum Wit et Resoun*—is one of the most curious and valuable monuments of middle English, affording to students of linguistics, of metrics, of sociology, of history, of theology, and of ecclesiasticism a wide and fertile field of research. It may be that in all these departments the inconsistency and inconclusiveness that baffle

the student of literature will, in the last analysis, render investigation unsatisfactory ; certainly from the literary point of view the poem presents problems with no answers, complexities with no fundamental unity, and mysteries with no explanation. Indeed, one sometimes feels justified in doubting whether the work has any right to be judged as a piece of literature, whether it is not entirely removed from the field of art ; but the place which the *Vision* has won and kept for now five centuries, and the very evident link which it forms in the evolution of certain literary forms precludes such an easy disposition of its difficulties.

One of the many wise sayings of the brilliant French critic, M. Brunetière, is "*L'action d'un écrivain sur son temps n'est jamais égale à la réaction de son temps sur l'écrivain.*" I shall attempt to show that the peculiar disproportion of "action" and "reaction" in this poem is due to the character of the poet's mind, and to a certain constitutional unwillingness at times, and inability at others, to reach conclusions.

It seems to me that none of the texts can lay claim to completeness. Even if the closing lines, 99-103, of Passus 12, A-text, are genuine, they can be regarded only as a makeshift, a clumsy device for abruptly closing a poem which the author would not or could not continue ; but Mr. Skeat has pointed out the probability that they are spurious. I can not, however, agree with that editor in the argument, or rather rhetoric, with which he treats the last lines of texts B and C :

"Dr. Whitaker suggested that the poem is not perfect ; that it must have been designed to have a more satisfactory ending, and not one so suggestive of disappointment and gloom. I am convinced that this opinion is erroneous ; not so much from the fact that nearly all the MSS. have here the word *Explicit*, as from the very nature of the case. What other ending can there be ? or rather, the end is not yet. We may be defeated, yet not cast down ; we may be dying, and behold, we live. We are all still pilgrims upon earth. *This* is the truth which the author's mighty genius would impress upon

us in his parting words. Just as the poet awakes in ecstasy at the end of the poem of Dobet, where he dreams of that which has been already accomplished, so here he is awoke by the cry of Conscience for help, and is silent at the thought of how much remains to be done. So far from ending carelessly, he seems to me to have ceased speaking at the right moment, and to have managed a very difficult matter with consummate skill."¹

As we shall see when we consider the allegory of the poem, the search is always for Christian perfection, signified under the three forms of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, graded according to the dreamer's ability to receive religious truth, and with Piers Plowman figuring as the ideal, the consummate expression of each. The last vision, that of Dobest, must naturally be conceived as including yet transcending the others, as demonstrating the meaning and value of the former effort. The vision of Dobet, after an impassioned description of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, His descent into hell, His victory over Satan, His visitation of "the spirits in prison," closes with the joyful notes of "*Ecce quam bonum*" and the clangor of Easter bells.

"and with that ich awakede,
And kallyd Kytte my wyf · and Kalote my doughter,
'A-rys, and go reuerence · godes resurrecioun.'"²

In the midst of the mass, Will falls asleep, and here begins the vision of Dobest, relating in the strongest allegory of the poem the history of the early church and the dissensions that threatened its unity. The second vision describes the evil days on which the church fell in Will's own time, the assault of Antichrist, aided by Sloth and Covetousness, Flattery at last entering the stronghold of Unity. Conscience, the gate-

¹ W. W. Skeat's 3-Text Edition of the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, Vol. II, p. 285.

² XXI, 472-474. In giving extracts from the poem, I quote from Mr. Skeat's admirable 3-Text Edition by passus and line, and, if not otherwise stated, from the C-text.

keeper, hard pressed by the enemies without, calls on Contrition for aid, but Contrition has been lulled to sleep by Flattery's enchanted drink; and Conscience, discouraged and disheartened, abandons Unity and starts on a new pilgrimage to find Piers Plowman.

"And suthe he gradde¹ after grace · til ich gan a-wake." *

To me there is but one explanation of an ending like this. If the author's object were to echo the words of the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity;" if he were convinced that the struggle for the ideal must ever be fruitless, endlessly repeated with endless discouragement; if he wished to show that even the divinest things on earth must finally succumb to the power of evil and leave poor, baffled human nature, where it began, still pursuing the *ignis fatuus* which it is never to attain;—then it is conceivable that he would attempt the proof in a work as long and elaborate as the *Vision of Piers Plowman*; but it is hardly possible that he would twice, and in part three times, remodel a poem of seven thousand lines without some hint of his purpose. Langland several times defines Dobest.³ Unintelligible and irreconcilable as some of these definitions may be, they at least contain no suggestion that Dobest is to prove unpractical, inefficient, the point at which the whole scheme fails. If again the writer wished to attack the ecclesiastical theory, to show that it had proved inadequate, and that conscience was leading men to seek true religion outside the boundaries established by holy church, and if further he had no courage in his conviction and wished to covertly insinuate his opinion, then it is conceivable that he would take this method of suggesting his conclusion; but the one point on which all critics of the *Vision* agree is that its author was an orthodox and devout believer in the Roman Catholic church, hating well the practices of her faithless servants because he loved well her

¹ *cried*.

² XXIII, 386.

³ See pp. 415 ff.

ideal of faith and life. True, the century afforded the spectacle of another Englishman who, starting from much the same standpoint that Langland occupied, ended by becoming a heretic and the leader of schismatics; and if we had but one text of the *Vision*, we might believe that the progress of its author was similar to that of Wyclif. But the B-text, written in 1377,¹ ends with practically the same words as the C-text which, revised sixteen years later, shows no defection from orthodoxy and catholicity of doctrine.

The close of the B-text at the same point as the C-text complicates the theory of incompleteness, seeming to necessitate an explanation, where there is no explanation, of why the author should have revised instead of continuing, and why the work should have again abruptly stopped with the same sentence. The causes which made the author leave the A-text unfinished may have interrupted his labors on the B-text; and when the work was again resumed, revision may have seemed, as it usually does after an interval of rest, a first necessity. Then failing health, increasing age, any one of a hundred reasons may have rendered him inadequate to the strain of fresh composition, or—an opinion to which the study of the poem inclines me—he may have been uncertain how to conclude, and so have again postponed the completion to a more convenient season. Dean Milman suggests that the remainder of the poem may have been lost,—a suggestion which the existence of thirty-two MSS. of the B-text and C-text renders improbable.

Demonstration of either the theory of incompleteness or its opposite is impossible; there is no ground for proof, and argument trails off into the expression of personal opinion.

Lacking all the qualities which made Chaucer a great poet, Langland produced a work worthy, in kind if not in degree, to rank with the *Canterbury Tales* as a picture-book of English men and manners in the fourteenth century. Due credit

¹ I adopt throughout the dates proposed by Mr. Skeat.

has long been given to the keen power of observation evinced in the *Vision of Piers Plowman*; it is the first and most apparent reaction of his time upon the author; it dwarfs his sensibility and supplies the place of imagination. Heaven and hell are alike English and mediæval. Nevertheless, Langland sees but things; that larger observation which perceives relations is foreign to his genius. Hence it follows that his poem consists of a series of detached pictures, a collection of separate visions, a compilation of distinct arguments, of which the connection must be sought rather in the probable intention of the writer than in the structure of his work.

The French say that the English cannot "compose;" and truly they themselves have made great progress since the days when the *Roman de la Rose* set the literary fashion of western civilization. Never since the days of Jean de Meun did a work claiming a place in literature show less "composition" than does Langland's poem. It opens with characteristic contrasts. Falling asleep on the Malvern hills, Will saw

"Al the welthe of this worlde · and the woo bothe,"¹

truth and treachery, treason and guile; eastward he beheld a high tower in which truth abode, westward a deep dale where death dwelt, and between "a fair feld, ful of folke"² where were

"Alle manere of men · the mene and the ryche,
Worchyng and wandrynge · as the worlde asketh."³

Then follow descriptions of various types and classes, prominent among them the sharp and telling satires on the clerical orders which characterize this work. In the second passus, Holy Church, in the guise of "a loueliche lady of lere,"⁴ comes from the tower and tells Will that Truth dwells therein, "he is fader of faith and formour of alle," i. e. God; the deep dale

¹ I, 10.

² I, 19.

³ I, 20 and 21.

⁴ *face*.

is the "castel of care" where lives Wrong, "fader of fals-hede," i. e. the Devil,¹—a reiteration of that opposition of good and evil eternally present to the Saxon mind. Then follows the question which must always arise when this contrast presses close on the conscience, and Will asks the "loueliche lady" to tell him how he may save his soul. It is noteworthy that the instruction which follows, although delivered by the allegorical representative of Holy Church, is characterized by neither theology nor ecclesiasticism. To live truly, according to the teaching of God the Father, and to love, according to the example of His Son, our Lord, make the sum of Christian doctrine. In this passage is struck one of the dominant notes of the *Vision*. It is preëminently a moral poem. From the outset it is evident that its writer was familiar with the theological controversies and the ecclesiastical quibbles of his day; his references to them are numerous, but almost invariably slighting and sometimes even denunciatory. To believe in God and the good which centers in Him, to love Jesus Christ and man whose likeness He bore, to deal honestly with one's neighbors and conscientiously with oneself,—that is the fundamental teaching of the poem. It is not that other duties and creeds are ignored. As we shall see, Langland willingly accepted the doctrines of the Catholic church; but he accepted them as secondary to Christian living. The whole work is like the echo of those words with which Samuel stung the fallen Saul, "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." Take, *e. g.*, the sermon of Reason in the second vision of "the feld ful of folke:"²—the recent pestilences and calamities were "for pure synne to punyshe the puple;" "he bad wastours go worche;" "he charged chapmen to chasten here children;" "he preide prelates and prestes" "that hij precheth to the

¹ II, 3-72.² VI, 111-201.

puple prouen hit hemselue ;" he reproved monks and canons who "priked a-boute on palfrais," "an hepe of houndes at hus ers, as he a lord were;" he advised the "riche and comuners to a-corden;" "he priede the pope haue pyte of holy-churche;" and finally he bad all who sought "seint Iame and seyntes of Rome" to seek "seinte Treuthe in sauacion of ȝoure saules." Similarly in the vision of the seven deadly sins,¹ repentance consists in forsaking the path of iniquity, and reparation is to be made, wherever possible, to those who have been wronged. It must, however, be admitted that in the first part of this scene the poet seems to be conscious that he is doing uncommonly good descriptive work, and that the technique of the artist more than balances the teaching of the moralist; but at the close Repentance, surrounded by the kneeling sinners, resumes the *motif* of the poem and prays for pardon to the loving God

"That art ferst oure fader · and of flesh oure brother,
 And sitthen ² oure saueour · and seidest with thy tonge,
 That what tyme we synful men · wolden be sory
 For dedes that we han don ille · dampned sholde we be neuere,
 Yff we knewelechid ³ and cryde · Crist ther-of mercy;
 And for that mochel mercy · and Marie loue thy moder,
 Haue reuthe of alle thuse rybaudes ⁴ · that repenten hem sore,
 That euere thei gulte agens the, god · in gost other in dede.
 * * * * *

A thousand of men tho ⁵ · throngen to-gederes,
 Crying vpward to Crist · and to hus clene moder,
 To haue grace to go to Treuthe;" ⁶

but no one could tell them the way until Piers Plowman offered to direct them.

The question that is suggested by the title of the poem and emphasized by each succeeding vision now demands attention. Who is Piers Plowman? In answering this question, we have also to consider the three-fold division of the poem into the visions of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest.

¹ VII; VIII, 1-157.

⁴ *ribalds*.

² *afterwards*.

⁵ *then*.

³ *acknowledged*.

⁶ VIII, 144-151, 155-157.

The expression Dowel is first introduced in the passage where Will reflects on the bull granted to Piers Plowman,

“And how the preest preuede¹ · no pardon to Do-wel;
And demede that Dowel · indulgences passede,
Byennals and tryennals · and bisshopes letteres.
For ho so doth wel here · at the daye of dome
Worth² faire vnderfonge³ · by-for god that tyme.
So Dowel passeth pardon · and pilgrimages to Rome.”⁴

Here evidently Dowel means simply right living. In the next passus, which begins the vision of Dowel, Will roams about

“Al a somer seson · for to seke Dowel,”⁵

asking many men where he might find it. At last he meets Thought, who replies thus to the question :

“‘Dowel and Dobet,’ quath he · ‘and Dobest the thridde
Beth thre fayre vertues · and beeth nauht ferr to fynde.
Who-so is trewe of hys tonge · and of hus two handes,
And thorw leel labour lyueth · and loueth his emcristine,⁶
And ther-to trewe of hus tail · and halt⁷ wel his handes,
Nouht dronkelewe⁸ ne deynous⁹ · Dowel hym folweth.
Dobet doth al this · ac gut he doth more;
He is lowe as a lombe · and loueliche of speche,
And helpeth herteliche alle men · of that he may aspare.¹⁰
* * * * *

Dobet bere sholde · the bisshopes croce,¹¹
And halye with the hoked ende · ille men to goode,
And with the pyk putte adoune · *preuaricatores legis*,
Lordes that lyuen as hem lust · and no lawe a-counten;
For here mok¹² and here meeble¹³ · suche men thynken
That no bisshop sholde · here byddinge with-sitte.¹⁴
Ac Dobest sholde nat dreden hem · bote do as god hihte,¹⁵
Nolite timere eos qui possunt occidere corpus.”¹⁶

This explanation, however, is not satisfactory, and Will covets to hear “a more kynde¹⁷ knowyng;”¹⁸ and after disputing

¹ proved. ² will be. ³ received. ⁴ X, 318-323. ⁵ XI, 2. ⁶ fellow Christians.
⁷ holds. ⁸ given to drinking. ⁹ disdainful. ¹⁰ spare. ¹¹ crosier. ¹² lit. muck;
money. ¹³ movable property. ¹⁴ withstand. ¹⁵ commanded. ¹⁶ XI, 76-84, 92-98.
¹⁷ natural. ¹⁸ XI, 108.

with Thought three days, he meets Wit, who gives him a new definition :

“Syre Dowel dwelleth,’ quath Wit · ‘nat a daye hennes,
 In a castel that Kynde¹ made. · * * * *
 * * * * * * * * *
 Kynde hath closed ther-ynne · craftilyche with-alle
 A lemman² that he loueth wel · lyke to hym-selue;
Anima hue hatte³ · to hure hath enuye
 A prout prikyere⁴ of Fraunce · *princeps huius mundi*,
 And wolde wynne hure away · with wiles, yf he myghte.
 And Kynde knoweth this wel · and kepeth hure the betere,
 And dooth⁵ hure with syre Dowel · duk of thes marches.
 Dobet ys here damsele · syre Doweles douhter,
 To serue that lady leelly · bothe late and rathe.⁶
 Dobest ys a-boue bothe · a bisshopes peer,
 And by hus lerynge⁷ is ladde · that ilke lady *Anima*.’”⁸

This characterization, which promises little but confusion, is interrupted by a long disquisition on sin, the duties of the church, and various unallied subjects, at the end of which Wit returns to a more practical solution of the vexing question, although the *thus* with which it is introduced must be attributed to rhetoric rather than to logic.

“And thus ys Dowel, my frend, · to do as lawe techeth,
 To louye and to lowe the · and no lyf to greue.
 Ac to louye and to lene⁹ · leyf¹⁰ me, that is Dobet;
 Ac to geue and to geme¹¹ · bothe gonge and olde,
 Helen and helpen · is Dobest of all.’”¹²

Clergy is more explicit in the definition of the first of these desirable qualities,

“yf thow coueyte Dowel,
 Kep the ten commaundemens · and kep the fro synne;
 And by-leyf leelly · how godes sone a-lyghte
 On the mayde Marie · for mankynnes sake,
 And by-cam man of that mayde · with-oute mannes kynde.
 And al that holy churche · here-of can the lere,¹³

¹ *Nature*. ² *sweet-heart*. ³ *is called*. ⁴ *rider*. ⁵ *places*. ⁶ *early*. ⁷ *teaching*.
⁸ XI, 127-141. ⁹ *lit. lend; here, give*. ¹⁰ *believe*. ¹¹ *protect*. ¹² XI, 304-308.
¹³ *teach*.

By-leyf lelly there-on · and look thow do ther-after.

* * * * *

Thus By-leyue and Leaute¹ · and Loue is the thridde,
That maketh men to Dowel · Dobet, and Dobest.”²

Imaginative, adding a description of Dobet, likewise omits Dobest. He says to Will :

“ ‘Ich haue yfolwed the in faith · more than fourty wynter,
And wissede³ the ful ofte · what Dowel was to mene,
And counsailede the for Cristes sake · no creature to by-gyle,
Nother to lye nother to lacke⁴ · ne lere that is defendid,⁵
Ne to spille⁶ speche · as to speke an ydel,
And no tyme to tyne⁷ · ne trewe thyng to teenen;⁸
Lowe the to lyue forth · in the lawe of holychurche;
Thenne dost thow wel, with-oute drede · ho can do bet, no forse!⁹
Clerkes that connen¹⁰ al · ich hope thei conne do bettere;
Ac hit suffiseth to be saued · and to be suche as ich tauhte.
Ac for to louye and lene · and lyue wel and by-leyue,
Ys ycallid *Caritas* · Kynde Loue in English;
And that is Dobet, yf eny suche be · a blessed man, that helpeth
That pees be and pacience · and poure with-oute defeaute.’ ”¹¹

A doctor of divinity is interrogated at the close of a feast, during which he has shown himself a monster of gluttony.

“ ‘Dowel?’ quath this doctour · and he drank after,
‘Do thy neyhebores non harme · ne thy-selue nother,
Thanne dost thow wel and wisliche · ich dar hit wel a-vouwe’
* * * * *
‘Ich haue seide,’ seide the seg¹² ‘y can seye no bettere,
Bote do as doctours telleth · for Dowel ich hit holde;
That traueileth to teche othere · for Dobet ich it holde;
And he that doth as he techeth · ich halde hit for a Dobest.’ ”¹³

Finally in a passage descriptive of the life of Jesus, the degrees of His beneficence are thus characterized :

“In hus Iuente¹⁴ this Iesus · at the Iuwene¹⁵ feste
Turned water in-to wyn · as holy writ telleth,
And ther by-gan god of hus grace · gretliche to Dowel.

¹ loyalty. ² XII, 142-148, 161 and 162. ³ showed. ⁴ blame. ⁵ forbidden.
⁶ waste. ⁷ lose. ⁸ vex. ⁹ matter. ¹⁰ know. ¹¹ XV, 3-16. ¹² man. ¹³ XVI,
112-114, 124-127. ¹⁴ youth. ¹⁵ Jews’.

For wyn is lykned to lawe · and lyf-holynesse ;
 And lawe lackede¹ tho · for men louede nat here enemys.
 And Crist counsaileth thus · and comaundeth bothe
 To lerede² and to lewede³ · for to loue oure enemys.
 So at that feste furst · as ich by-fore tolde,
 By-gan god of hus grace · and of hus goodness to Do-wel ;

* * * * *

After the kynde that he cam of · ther comsede⁴ he Dowel.
 And whenne he was woxen more · in hus modres absence,
 He made lame to leepe · and gaf light to blynd,
 And fedde with two fisshes · and with fyue loues
 Sore a-fyngred⁵ fele folke · mo than fyf thousand.
 Thus he comfortede careful · and cauhte a grettere name,
 The whiche was Dobet · wher that he wente,
 For deue⁶ thorgh hus doynge · and dombe speke and herde,
 And alle he heled and halp⁷ · that hym of grace askyde.

* * * * *

And when this dede was don · Dobest he thouhte,
 And gaf Peers power · and pardon he grauntede
 To alle manere of men · mercy and forgyuenesse,
 And gaf hym myghte to asoyle men · of alle manere synnes.”⁸

It is evident that all these passages suggest a progression of virtue, a development of the Christian ideal, and it is probable that this advance was, to the mind of the author, each time indicated by practically identical terms ; but here again we must seek the intention rather than the actual expression, and for this a comprehensive study of the whole work is necessary.

At his first introduction, there can be no doubt that Piers Plowman represents the ideal English laborer, serving “Treuthe sothlyche,”⁹ modelling his life according to the ten commandments, loyal to his lord but not afraid to give him advice and admonition, remaining at his work while “wasters” and beggars riot in idleness. In the allegory of the famine, pestilence, and social disturbance there is no indication of supernatural character in the hero, and the bull of pardon which he receives is such as anyone acquainted with

¹ was lacking. ² learned. ³ ignorant. ⁴ commenced. ⁵ “an hungred.” ⁶ deaf.
⁷ helped. ⁸ XXII, 108-116, 123-131, 182-185. ⁹ VIII, 189.

the first principles of Christian doctrine might evolve for himself:

*"Qui bona egerunt ibunt in uitam eternam:
Qui uero mala, in ignem eternum;"*¹

or, as the priest translates,

"do wel and haue wel · and god shal haue thy saule,
Do vuel² and haue vuel · and hope thow non other
Bote he that vuel lyueth · vuel shal ende."³

In the vision of Dowel, Piers Plowman does not appear until near the close. Mr. Skeat is of the opinion that he becomes identified with Jesus Christ in the sixteenth passus, where, in the midst of a discussion of Dowel, he suddenly appears with the words:

" 'pacientes uincunt.
By-for perpetual pees · ich shal preoue that ich seide,
And a-vowe by-for god · and for-sake hit neuere,
That *disce, doce, dilige · deum* and thyn enemye;
Hertely thou hym helpe · emforth⁴ thy myȝt,
Cast hote coles on hus hefde⁵ · of alle kynde speche,
Fonde⁶ thorgh wit and with worde · hus loue for to wynne,
And gif hym eft and eft · euere at hus neede;
Conforte hym with thy catel⁷ · and with thy kynde speche,
And leye on hym thus with loue · tyl he lauhe on the;
And bote he bowe for this betyng · blynd mote he worthe!⁸
And whanne he hadde worded thus · wiste no man after,
Where Peers Plouhman by-cam · so priueliche he wente."⁹

It does not seem to me necessary to make the identification at this point; the words are such as Piers Plowman, in the character formerly borne, might naturally speak. Neither does the avowal of *Activa-vita* that he is the apprentice of Piers Plowman argue the identification, as the only definition given of his mission is "alle people to comfortye,"¹⁰ an office which Piers had already assumed by guiding the people to Truth and by possessing the bull of pardon, *i. e.* the knowledge of the gospel plan of salvation.

¹ X, 287. ² *evil*. ³ X, 289-291. ⁴ *according to*. ⁵ *head*. ⁶ *try*. ⁷ *property*.
⁸ *become*. ⁹ XVI, 138-150. ¹⁰ XVI, 195.

Since the character of Piers Plowman can give us no help, we must seek elsewhere the key to the vision of Dowel. It is rather a collection of separate visions, in which Will pursues his quest, meeting in succession Thought, Wit, Study, Clergy (learning or knowledge), Scripture, Recklessness, Reason, Conscience, and Free Will. These allegorical personages and the long, and, it must be confessed, often wearisome discussions in which the author involves them, indicate to my mind the attempt of the "natural man"—to use the Pauline phrase formerly dear to theologians—to find the ideal life; in other words, the struggle for moral perfection.

In the midst of a long dialogue with the dreamer, Free Will mentions Charity, and after describing the virtue adds, "Peers the Plouhman most parfitliche hym knoweth."¹ It is here, in my opinion, that Piers Plowman becomes identified with Jesus Christ, and that the vision of Dobet really begins, nearly one hundred lines before the words, "*Hic explicit passus septimus et ultimus de Dowel.*" "*Incipit passus primus de Dobet.*" The three following passus are occupied with the discussion of Charity, the vision of Faith and Hope, who are seeking Christ, and of Charity, who is Christ himself, and the story of the life and crucifixion of Jesus, who is said to

"Iouste in Peers armes,
In hus helme and hus haberion · *humana natura.*"²

There can be no doubt of the meaning of Dobet,—it is the Christian life, illustrated by our Lord.

In the last vision, Piers Plowman represents the church of Christ, having power to "bind and loose," whence, perhaps, the name Piers—Peter. The designation Plowman gains added significance, if, indeed it may not justly be supposed to be directly derived, from the allegory of Holy Church as a plowman, set to "tulye³ treuthe"⁴ with a team of four oxen, the Evangelists, and with

"foure stottes,⁵
Al that hus oxen ereden⁶ · thei to harwen⁷ after."⁸

¹ XVII, 337. ² XXI, 21 and 22. ³ *till*. ⁴ XXII, 261. ⁵ *bullocks*.
⁶ *ploughed*. ⁷ *harrow*. ⁸ XXII, 267 and 268.

These are the Fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory, and Jerome.

Piers was to sow in men's hearts the cardinal virtues, and to harrow them with the old and new laws, so

"that loue myghte wexe
Amonge these foure vertues · and vices destruyen."¹

And Piers built the house of Unity, "holychurche in Englishe."²

"And whanne this dede was don · Grace deuysede
A cart, hihte Cristendome · to carien home Peers sheues;
And gaf hym capeles³ to hus cart · Contricion with Confession,
And made Preosthood haiwarde⁴ · the while hym-self wente
As wide as the worlde is · with Peers to tulye treuthe,
And the londe of by-leyue · the lawe of holychurche."⁵

This allegory roughly suggests the marvellous pageant of the church militant seen by Dante in the Terrestrial Paradise, and both doubtless found their *motif* in the prophecy of Ezekiel and Jerome's interpretation of the "four living creatures;" but while Dante's vision is sublime, symbolic, poetic, Langland's is homely, practical,—in a word, plowmanlike.

Pride gathered a great host and attempted to undo the work of Piers; but, moved by Conscience, the people fled for refuge to the house of Unity. Then follows the vision of Antichrist, and the poem stops. The allegory can not be misunderstood; Piers Plowman is the church, the exponent of Christ on earth, and Dobest is its ideal life.

As I have shown, the poem seems to me unfinished. Those who believe it to be complete have difficulty in proving what of "best" there is in a church besieged by Antichrist and abandoned by Conscience; those who think it incomplete can but guess the conclusion, and that is a process little adapted to convince others.

¹ XXII, 312 and 313. ² XXII, 330. ³ horses. ⁴ *lit.* hedge-warden; keeper of cattle. ⁵ XXII, 331-336.

Obscure and broken as the allegory is—and how obscure, how broken only those know who have studied it, and have seen interpretation after interpretation give way just as it seemed to fit the general scheme—I am convinced that this was, in general, the aim of the writer:—to typify by a human life founded on belief in God and subject to moral guidance, by Jesus Christ, and by the Christian church, three kinds of perfection; and as the ideal manhood of *Piers Plowman* suggested and finally merged into the divine manhood of Christ Jesus, so, in turn, He departing left as His representative the ideal church, to guide, teach, and minister in His stead, that thus the circle might be complete, and the fulness of life flow back to man.

Langland's attitude to the church was peculiarly a product of his time. The tide of free thought, of individuality, of independence, sweeping men from the old moorings, had already effected that separation necessary for criticism; men were daring to lift unveiled eyes to the church, and to measure her outward manifestations by the standards applied to human institutions, while at the same time they still rested in the shadow of her authority, and at every fresh shock to their respect turned back to her with the passionate cry wrung from their love and their faith, "To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." It was these words, answering the ever-present desire of the Saxon to save his soul, that constituted the chief claim of the church. When the reformers could turn this quest toward the Bible and man's conscience, then the hold of the church was broken. But the times were not yet ripe; and in the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, more clearly than in any work of its century, we read the conflict between doubt of the reality and faith in the ideal, which harassed the English middle class.

The most scathing of Langland's satires claim no more than passing notice; they are a feature of his poem apparent on even a superficial reading, and have not infrequently deluded those content with such reading into the belief that their author

was identified with the Wycliffite or even the Lollard movement,—an opinion that proves its holders totally unacquainted with the spirit of the poem they attempt to judge. It was an age of free speech and open criticism, and the religious orders furnished the legitimate and conventional targets for satirical shafts. Consider Langland's treatment of the monks and friars: it is true that he seldom neglected an opportunity to denounce and deride their immorality, their hypocrisy, their wantonness; but for the orders as founded by Francis and Dominic he had a hearty respect, repeatedly urging the members to return to their first estate, and in that famous passage into which has frequently been read a prophecy of the acts of Henry VIII, it is a reformatory and not a destructive work that is foretold.

“Ac¹ gut shal come a kyng · and confesse gow alle,
 And bete gow, as the byble telleth · for brekyng of goure reule,
 And amende gow monkes · moniales,² and chanons,
 And putte gow to goure penaunce · *ad pristinum statum ire*.
 And barons and here barnes³ · blame gow and reproue;
 * * * * *
 Freres in here freitour,⁴ · shulle fynde that tyme
 Bred with-oute beggyng · to lyue by euere after,
 And Constantyn shal be here cook · and couerer of here churche,
 For the abbot of Engelonde · and the abbesse hys nece
 Shullen haue a knok on here crounes · and in-curable the wounde;
 * * * * *
 Ac er that kyng come · as cronycles me tolde,
 Clerkus and holychurche · shal be clothed newe.”⁵

Likewise the mercenariness of the secular clergy, the ingratitude of their preaching and their living, received from Langland ready reproof; but evil practices did not shake his faith in the theory of the priesthood, nor dull his appreciation of the good existing within it.

“As holyness and honeste · out of holy churche
 Spryngeth and spredeth · and enspireth the peuple
 Thorgh parfit preest-hood · and prelates of holichurche,

¹ but. ² nuns. ³ children. ⁴ refectory. ⁵ VI, 169–180.

Ryght so out of holychurche · al vuel spredeth,
Ther imparfit preest-hod is · prechours and techours.”¹

The sturdy British spirit that led Langland to reprove the king and point the way of royal reformation did not shrink before the pope, the spiritual ruler of the world and Vicar of Christ. Will complains that Mede

“ys priuy with the pope · prouisours it knoweth,
For Symonye and hure-self · seeleth hure bulles.”²

He prays

“god amende the pope · that pileth³ holichurche,
And cleymeth by-fore the kyng · to beo kepere ouere Cristyne,
And counteth nogt thauh Cristene-men · be culled and robbed,
And fyndeth folke to fighte · and Cristene blod to spille,
Ageyn the lawe bothe old and newe.”⁴

Yet it is always *because* the pope is the head, the chief authority, the visible exponent of the highest dominion, that these complaints are made. He who had the power once committed to Peter ought to be like him in charity; he who represented Christ ought to resemble Him in humility; he who was first in the church ought to set the example of Christian conduct. The beauty of the ideal gives force to the denunciation of the real; but to Langland's mind a church without a pope was as incomplete as a country without a king or a man without a head.

“For were preest-hod more parfyt · that is, the pope forrest,⁵
That with moneye menteyneth men · to werren⁶ vp-on cristine.
A-gens the lore of oure lorde · as seynt Luk wytneseth,

* * * * *

Hus prayers with hus pacience · to pees sholde brynge
Alle londes to loue · and that in a lytel tyme;
The pope with alle preestes · *pax-uobis* sholde make!

* * * * *

In suche manere, me thynketh · moste the pope,
Prelates, and preestes · prayen and by-seche
Deuowtliche day and nygt · and with-drawe hem fro synne,

¹ XVII, 242-246. ² IV, 184 and 185. ³ pillages. ⁴ XXII, 444-448.

⁵ first. ⁶ war.

And crye to Crist that he wolde · hus coluere¹ sende,
 The whiche is the holy gost · that out of heuene descendede,
 To make a perpetuel pees · by-twyne the prynce of heuene
 And alle manere of men · that on this molde² lybbeth.
 Yf preest-hod were parfit and preyede thus · the people sholde amende,
 That now contrarien Cristes lawes · and Cristendom despisen.”³

Holy Church, the “loueliche lady of lere,” is another of the ideals to which he clings; at his baptism he had promised to fulfill her bidding and to believe on her all his lifetime; but it is no narrow, dogmatic ecclesiasticism to which he gives his loyalty. “What is holychurche?”⁴ he asks Free Will, and the answer is a prophecy of the non-conforming creeds of Christendom :

“ ‘Charite,’ he seyde,
 ‘Lyf, and Loue, and Leaute · in o⁵ by-leyue and lawe,
 A loue-knotte of leaute · and of leel by-leyue,
 Alle kynne⁶ cristene · cleuyng on o wyl,
 With-oute gyle and gabbyng.’ ”⁷ ”⁸

Nevertheless, Langland held the ecclesiastical tenets of his time, believing when he did not understand, and illustrating that attitude of the true Roman Catholic to his church, which is the hardest for the Protestant mind to comprehend, but which within our own century Cardinal Newman and his followers have proved possible for the keenest intellects in the Anglican communion.

The doctrine of indulgences, the rock on which Catholicism was destined to split, was beginning to disturb the western church. What was Langland’s opinion ?

“Al this maketh me · on meteles⁹ to studie,
 And how the preest preuede · no pardon to Do-wel;
 And demede that Dowel · indulgences passede,
 Byennals and tryennals · and bisshopes letteres.
 For ho so doth wel here · at the daye of dome
 Worth faire vnderfonge · by-for god that tyme.

¹ *dove.* ² *earth.* ³ XVIII, 233–238; 243–251. ⁴ XVIII, 125. ⁵ *one.*
⁶ *kinds of.* ⁷ *lying.* ⁸ XVIII, 125–129. ⁹ *dreams.*

So Dowel passeth pardon · and pilgrimages to Rome;
 gut hath the pope power · pardon to graunte
 To puple, with-oute penaunce · to passen in-to Ioye,
 As lettred men ous lereth · and lawe of holy churche:
 * * * * *

And so ich by-leyue leelly · lordes forbode elles,
 That pardon and penaunce · and preieres don saue
 Saules that han synged¹ · seuene sithes² dedliche.
 Ac to trysten³ vpon triennels · treweliche me thynketh
 Ys nat so syker⁴ for the saule · certys, as ys Dowel.”⁵

Consider the allied practice of making pilgrimages in expiation of sin. Pilgrims and palmers

“Wenten forth in hure way · with meny vn-wyse tales,
 And hauen leue to lye · al hure lyf-time.”⁶

The pilgrim who wore on his hat

“Signes of Syse⁷ · and shilles⁸ of Galys,⁹
 And meny crouche¹⁰ on hus cloke · and keyes of Rome,
 And the fernycle by-fore,”¹¹

when asked if he knew

“a cor-seynt¹² * * * · that men clepeth¹³ Treuthe?”¹⁴

frankly replies,

“Nay, so god me helpe * * * *
 Ich seyh neuere palmere · with pyk ne with scrippe
 Asken after hym, er now · in thys ilke place.”¹⁵

Yet here again it is the insufficiency of deeds without faith that is emphasized, rather than the fundamental inadequacy of the deeds.

“*Cordis contricio* · cometh of sorwe in herte,
 And *oris confessio* · that cometh of shrifte of mouthe,
 And *operis satisfactio* · that for synnes payeth,
 And for alle synnes · soueraynliche quiteth.

¹ sinned. ² times. ³ trust. ⁴ safe. ⁵ X, 317-331. ⁶ I, 49 and 50. ⁷ Assisi.
⁸ shells. ⁹ Gallica. ¹⁰ cross. ¹¹ VIII, 166-168. ¹² saint. ¹³ call. ¹⁴ VIII,
 177. ¹⁵ VIII, 179-181.

* * * * *
 Bote these thre that ich spak of · on domes day vs defenden,
 Elles is in ydel · al oure lyuynge here,
 Oure preyers and oure penaunce · and pilgrimages to Rome.”¹

When the house of Unity is hard pressed by the force of Pride,

“Ther ne was Cristyne creature · that kynde wit hadde,
 That he ne halp a quantyte · holynesse to wexe;
 Some by bedes-byddyng² · and somme by pilgrimages,
 Other othere pryueie penaunces · and somme thorw pansdelynge.”³ ⁴

The necessity of the two principal sacraments—baptism and the eucharist—is expressly stated in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which should be read in connection with the many passages in which faith and love are emphasized as apparently the only requisites of salvation :

“Here help wolde nat vaille,
 Ne medecine vnder molde · the man to hele brynge,
 Nother Faith ne fyn Hope · so festered aren hus wondes ;
 With-oute the blod of a barn · he beoth nouht ysaued,
 The whiche barn mot neodes · be bore of a mayde,
 And with the blod of that barn · embaumed and baptized,
 And thauh he steppe and stande · right strong worth he neuere
 Til he haue eten al that barn · and hus blod dronken,
 * * * * *
 And gut be-leyue leelly · vpon that litel baby,
 That his likame⁵ schal lechen⁶ · atte laste ous alle.”⁷

Belief in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was to Langland another essential of Christian life ; but in spite of repeated recurrence to the problem, he proved inadequate to the task of explaining the mystery, and offered to himself as well as to his readers the characteristic advice :

“Muse not to muche ther-on * * tyl thou more knowe,
 Ac looke thou leyue⁸ hit leelly · al thy lyf-tyme.”⁹

¹ XVII, 29-32, 37-39. ² *lit. bidding of beads ; praying of prayers.* ³ *lit. pence-dealing ; almsgiving.* ⁴ XXII, 375-378. ⁵ *body.* ⁶ *cure.* ⁷ XX, 81-88, 92 and 93. ⁸ *believe.* ⁹ XIX, 199 and 200.

This, indeed, was Langland's conclusion in most theological discussions; his mind had not the qualities which enabled it to think easily or clearly on supernatural subjects; that "fair felde ful of folke" pressed too close on his vision to allow him to see far beyond the present wretchedness of humanity. Yet he maintained a dogged faith in the essential value of theology, while for practical purposes he considered love and truth the saving graces.

"Ac Theologie hath teened me · ten score tymes,
 The more ich muse ther-on · the mystiloker¹ hit semeth,
 And the deppere ich deuyne · the derker me thynketh hit,
 Hit is no science sothliche² · bote a sothfast³ by-leyue;
 Ac for hit lereth men to louye · ich by-leyue ther-on the bettere."⁴

These verses may fairly be taken as the key to his theological, religious, and ecclesiastical position. In nothing is he more characteristically English and middle-class than in his adherence to those long cherished beliefs which he had received from his superiors. There is either a wilful blindness or an honest indifference in his attitude toward some of the greatest questions which were agitating the nation. With a mental acumen rarely surpassed by even the keenest intellects of his time, with a moral instinct painfully developed and constantly cultivated, with a passion for sincerity which caused him to lift his voice against hypocrisy and all unrighteousness, even in high places, he held fast to a faith from which, apparently, these qualities demanded a revolt. His visions remain a series of contradictions and surprises. Just when the force of logic seems to require from his premises conclusions similar to those which Wyclif was deducing from the same facts by different reasoning, Langland hesitated, drew back, reiterated a general principle, changed the subject, or abruptly ended the vision. It can, of course, be held without the possibility of positive contradiction that he was unconscious of the direction in which his arguments and

¹ *mistier.* ² *truly.* ³ *steadfast.* ⁴ XII, 129-133.

illustrations led, and that the strength of his faith in the Catholic church precluded the suspicion of its insecurity or temporality; but the frequency of these inconclusive passages has led me to the belief—less demonstrable by a series of extracts than appreciable from the tone of the entire poem—that the author was not only aware of the tendency of his thoughts but was consciously afraid of their natural conclusions. As in the passage concerning indulgences, so in many, rather in practically all, others that deal with specific and authorized tenets of the church, the saving clause was hurriedly inserted after the dangerous admission, and agreement with the theory if not the practice was signified, because “lettred men” or Holy Church or some pope, prelate, or power required it.

“Countrepleide¹ it nogt * * for holy churches sake,”²

cried Conscience *à propos* of

“the cardinales at court · that caught han such a name,
And power presumen in hem-self · a pope to make,
To haue the power that peter hadde ·.”³

It is an argument that prevailed with Will in more instances than this. Even those passages which, by themselves, seem to show a departure from orthodox doctrine, when read in connection with others, are usually found to be balanced by a confession of faith. In any consideration of the religious aspects of this poem it is necessary to maintain the distinction, which was always clearly present to the author, between the practices of the clergy and the principles of the church, and to remember that, in view of the contemporary literature, severity of criticism can not be argued as indicative of opposition to ecclesiastical theories.

Great reforms arise not because men will but because they must change their beliefs or their customs or their govern-

¹ *contradict.* ² I, 138. ³ I, 134–136.

ments. The inertia of human nature, particularly of Teutonic nature, delays this change long beyond the period at which to observers, separated by distance of time or of interest, it seems an imperative necessity; men cleave to that which has been because it has been, and shrink even from that which ought to be because it is not a part of daily experience. This tendency is peculiarly manifest in religious matters, where an inherited love and reverence for the sanctity of established habits and tenets is added to the natural dislike of change. There can be no adequate estimate of the Protestant reformation without due consideration of the stolid opposition which it overcame in the British character. Langland is, to my mind, a typical representative of the English middle class in the century to which must be traced the beginnings of the reformation. While he viewed his country, his fellows, and himself with a gaze that daily gained clearness and penetration, he clung with desperate force to the old formulæ, and rather than read the logic of events deliberately shut his eyes. It is this view of his character that strengthens my belief in the incompleteness of his poem. While his undoubted faith in his own orthodoxy precludes the hypothesis that the work was an intentional exposition of the insufficiency of the Catholic church, and while its structure forbids the theory that it was designed to close in doubt and defeat, the evident unwillingness of Langland to conclude his arguments and develop his illustrations seems to me satisfactory explanation of the condition in which he left his life-work. In that last vision of the house of Unity attacked by Antichrist he reached his Rubicon; even to his half-blind eyes there lay a boundary between the position he had held and that to which he was advancing; he must either cross into the mazes of heresy or retreat to the strongholds of orthodoxy, and while he hesitates the years drop their veil.

Closely allied to the ecclesiastical revolutions then beginning to agitate England were the social disturbances which destroyed the ancient system of villeinage, and inaugurated

the era of free contracts. Looking back through the telescope of history, it is easy for us to imagine that the whole nation was consciously involved in these movements, and that the country was an open forum for religious and political discussion. We forget that even at the most critical periods the main current of life flows monotonously along its habitual channel, and that the average man eats and sleeps and joys and grieves unmindful of throes that are the birth or death pangs of the nation. Even in literature, to which we look for the permanent record of popular thought, we not infrequently find silence on subjects which apparently most deserve words, and passing mention of events which mark epochs. The poet who gave lasting glory to the stormy reign of Richard II, left practically no comment on the most serious problems of that time, withdrawing, perhaps, into the enchanted realm of his fancy as a respite from the turmoil of public affairs. Langland's silences are less easily explained than are those of Chaucer, who avowedly wrote pleasing fiction for a pleasure-loving people. That "Long Will's" purpose was far different is proclaimed by the title of his poem. Written for those classes of which the *Piers Plowman* of the first vision was the ideal, by a man who, if not of them, was but slightly removed, the poem carried its own introduction to circles in which Chaucer's courtly knight and dainty prioress were, at the best, but half known and appreciated; nevertheless, the inconclusiveness which we have noted in the author's treatment of religious questions is even more apparent in those portions of his work that deal with social subjects, and, in addition, there is manifest a lack of sympathy which at first reading seems incomprehensible.

Langland's own social condition remains an open question, a matter of inference from, at the most, half a dozen passages in the *Vision*. Except by his poem he made absolutely no impression on his time; no contemporary mention of him has been discovered; and although from the first circulation of the A-text his work was widely disseminated, he himself,

so far as we can judge, remained unknown, a tall, gaunt figure, lost in the solitude of the London crowd. He wore the tonsure,¹ as a sign of having received the minor clerical orders, which did not, however, prevent his marriage.² He was

“to waik to worche · with sykel other with sythe,
And to long, * * lowe for to stoupe,
To worchen as a workeman.”³

With his wife and daughter,⁴ he lived “in Londone and on Londone bothe,”⁵ “clothed as a lolere”⁶ and in “manere of a mendinaunt,”⁷ singing the *pater noster*, the *placebo*, *dirige*, and the seven penitential psalms for the souls of those who helped him, and thus finding food and a welcome wherever he went.⁸ In his youth, his father and friends sent him to school where he learned to read his Bible⁹ and made such further good use of his time as the erudition of his poem proves. These are his statements concerning himself, from which, by a vigorous exercise of the imagination and a judicious admixture of mediæval history, it is possible to evolve a chapter or even a volume on the life of Langland, which will furnish entertaining reading to lovers of fiction. On the other hand, the possibility remains that any or all of these facts were introduced for the sake of making a point, illustrating a principle, or constructing a consistent character,—a supposition which the general tone of the poem and the frankness of contemporary literature renders improbable.

Regarding these personal fragments as bits of actual biography and examining them in the strongest light afforded by history, we gain from the author's own admissions but little information respecting his life. We are sent back to his poem and to a process of inferential reasoning therefrom, and find ourselves constantly assailed by a temptation to read into his lines our own preconceived notions and prejudiced opinions. The *Vision of Piers Plowman* is doubtless a rich mine of even

¹ VI, 56. ² XXI, 473. ³ VI, 23-25. ⁴ XXI, 473. ⁵ VI, 44. ⁶ VI, 2.
⁷ XVI, 3. ⁸ VI, 44-52. ⁹ VI, 35-37.

yet undeveloped treasure; but the honest miner must not load his pack before he leaves the surface.

Early in the poem, Will confronts

“A loueliche lady of lere · in lynnyn y-clothed”¹

and begging to know her name is told :

“‘Holychurche ich am * * * thow oghtest me to knawe;
Ich vnder-feng the formest · and fre man the made.
Thow broghtest me borwes² · my byddyng to fulfille,
To leue on me and louye me · al thy lyf tyme.’”³

On our interpretation of this passage depends our conception of the social condition of the author, and incidentally our understanding of the social significance of his poem. There are two readings :—the one advocated by Mr. Skeat, the other by M. Jusserand. According to the former, the reference here made is to the author's baptism and consequent spiritual freedom; according to the latter, it is to the conferring of clerical orders, which we know Langland to have received, and the change in social position which followed when bondsmen's sons became “clerks.” The first point to be noticed is that the passage in which these verses occur is an allegory with a spiritual significance. Again, when, in the midst of a long harangue by Scripture, Will steadies his trembling heart by the remembrance of Holy Church it is as one

“That vnderfong me atte fount · for on of godes chosene;”⁴

and he replies to Scripture,

“Thenne may alle Cristene come · and cleyme ther to entre
By that blod that he boughte ous with · and baptisme, as he tauhte.”⁵

Baptised men are to put off “the pouke”⁶ by proving themselves “vnder borwe.”⁷ So that there seems good reason, both from its connection and from its phraseology, to con-

¹ II, 3. ² *pledges*. ³ II, 72-75. ⁴ XIII, 52. ⁵ XIII, 57 and 58. ⁶ *devil*.
⁷ B-text, XIV, 190.

sider the passage as a reference to baptism. Let us see what follows the alternative interpretation. The church opened the main path of advancement for men of servile birth. If the lord's consent could be gained or his refusal evaded, the son of a villein might be sent to school, which was in practically all cases an adjunct of the church. Thus introduced to the nearest approach to a democracy that the times afforded, the youth of low degree was, to an extent elsewhere unknown, the master of his fortune. Once received into even the lowest clerical order, he could plead "benefit of clergy," not only in civil courts but against the claims of his former owner, who thereafter had no jurisdiction over the man sealed with the sign of the church. As was natural, this privilege was freely used by base-born and ambitious youths, who desired to improve their fortunes in this world as well as in the next. It is to this class that M. Jusserand refers our author, with the statement, "*Toutes les remarques de l'auteur, tous ses jugements, tous ses retours sur lui-même, c'est-à-dire tout ce qui fait, au point de vue qui nous occupe, le ton et la couleur du poème, concordent avec l'hypothèse d'un enfant de basse origine, d'une intelligence éveillée, qui, grâce à des protecteurs, intéressés par sa vivacité d'esprit, a pu étudier, devenir clerc, rompre par là ses liens de servage, et vivre tant bien que mal à l'état libre;*"¹ and he adds in testimony the claim of Holy Church already quoted. This interpretation he finds corroborated by the passage in which Will is reproached by Reason for his indolence.

" 'Canstow² seruen,' he seide · 'other syngen in a churche,
Other coke for my cokers · other to the cart picche,³
Mowe other mowen⁴ · other make bond to sheues,
Repe other be a repereyue⁵ · and a-ryse erliche,
Other haue an horne and be haywarde · and ligen⁶ oute a nyghtes,
And kepe my corn in my croft · fro pykers and theeues?
Other shappe⁷ shon other clothes · other shep other kyn kepe,
Heggen⁸ other harwen · other swyn other gees dryue."⁹

¹ J. J. Jusserand, *L'Épopée Mystique de William Langland*, p. 67.

² canst thou. ³ pitch. ⁴ stack hay. ⁵ head-reaper. ⁶ lie. ⁷ shape, make.

⁸ make hedges. ⁹ VI, 12-19.

All these are, as M. Jusserand truly says, "*Les travaux ouvriers aux champs et à la ville.*"¹ If then, continues the critic, he had been the son of a "franklin"—a freeman—he would have alleged his birth as his excuse; but his only justification is his tonsure:

"Men sholde constreyne no clerke · to knaune² werkes;
 For by lawe of Leuitici · that oure lord ordeynede,
 Clerkes that aren crowned³ · of kynde vnderstondyng
 Sholde nother swynke⁴ ne swete⁵ · ne swere at enquestes
 Ne fyghte in no vauntwarde⁶ · ne hus fo greue;
 * * * * *
 For it ben aires of heuene · alle that ben crowned,
 And in queer⁷ and in kirkes · Cristes owene mynestres,
 * * * * *
 Hit by-cometh for clerkus · Crist for to seruen,
 And knaues vncrowned · to cart and to worche."⁸

It is in his next statement that I part company with M. Jusserand. "*Il ajoute, il est vrai: 'D'ailleurs nul clerc ne devrait recevoir la tonsure, s'il n'était fils de franklin et d'homme libre.' Mais cela ne signifie pas autre chose que: Voyez ma tonsure, vous n'avez pas le droit d'en demander plus; si je l'ai, vous devez croire que je suis de condition libre; de quelque manière que vous envisagiez les choses, ma tonsure suffit: je la porte, donc je n'ai pas à travailler des mains.*"⁹ There are other passages which must be studied before we can so easily pronounce on the meaning of this, and in the process we shall do well to search for those remarks, those personal references, and that tone and color from which the French critic draws his conclusion.

First we find the direct statement which M. Jusserand has skilfully but, as it seems to me, unjustifiably paraphrased. It joins without break to the verses last quoted.

"For shold no clerk be crowned · bote yf he ycome were
 Of franklens and free men · and of folke yweddede."¹⁰

¹ *L'Épopée Mystique de William Langland*, p. 72. ² *knaves*. ³ *crowned with the tonsure*. ⁴ *toil*. ⁵ *sweat*. ⁶ *van*. ⁷ *choir*. ⁸ VI, 54-62. ⁹ *L'Épopée Mystique de William Langland*, p. 75. ¹⁰ *wedded*.

Bondmen and bastardes · and beggers children,
 Thuse by longeth to labour · and lordes kyn to seruen
 Bothe god and good men · as here degree asketh.

* * * * *

Ac sith bondemenne¹ barnes · han be mad bisshopes,
 And barnes bastardes · han ben archidekenes,
 And sopers and here sones · for seluer han be knyghtes,
 And lordene² sones here laborers · and leid here rentes to wedde,³
 For the ryght of this reame · ryden a-gens oure enemys,
 In comfote of the comune · and the kynges worshep,
 And monkes and moniales · that mendinauns⁴ sholden fynde,
 Han mad here kyn knyghtes · and knyghtfees purchased,
 Popes and patrones · poure gentil blod refuseth,
 And taken Symondes sone · seyntewarie⁵ to kepe.
 Lyf-holynesse and loue · han ben longe hennes,
 And wole, til hit be wered out · or otherwise ychaunged.”⁶

It was, I believe, M. Jusserand who first pointed out that these verses doubtless have reference to a petition of the Commons, recorded in 1391.

*“Item priont les Communes de ordeiner et comander que null neif ou vileyn mette ses enfantz de cy en avant à escoles pour eux avancer par clergie, et ce en maintenance et salvation de l’honneur de toutz frankes du roialme.”*⁷

Attention should be paid to parallel or similar passages.

“Ac those eremytes that edefyen⁸ thus · by the hye weyes,
 Whilom were workmen · webbes⁹ and taillours,
 And carters knaues · and clerkus with-out grace,
 Helden ful hungry hous · and hadde much defaute,
 Long labour and lyte¹⁰ wynnynge · and atte laste aspiden,¹¹
 That faitours¹² in frere¹³ clothyng · hadde fatte chekus.
 For-thi lefte thei here laboure · these lewede knaues,
 And clothed hem in copes · clerkus as hit were.

* * * * *

Wher see we hem on Sonedays · the seruyse to hyure,
 As, matyns by the morwe¹⁴ · tyl masse by-gynne,
 Other Sonedays at euesonge · seo we wel¹⁵ fewe!
 Othere labory for here lifode · as the lawe wolde?

¹ bondmen's. ² lords'. ³ pledge. ⁴ mendicants. ⁵ sanctuary. ⁶ VI, 63-67, 70-81. ⁷ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, v. III, p. 294. ⁸ build. ⁹ weavers. ¹⁰ little.
¹¹ espied, saw. ¹² impostors. ¹³ friars'. ¹⁴ morning. ¹⁵ very.

Ac at mydday meel-tyme · ich mete with him ofte,
 Comynge in a cope · as he a clerke were;
 A bacheler other a beaupere¹ · best hym by-semeth;
 And for the cloth that keuereth hym · cald is he a frere,
 Wassheth and wypeth · and with the furste sitteth.
 Ac while he wrought² in thys worlde · and wan hus mete with treuthe,
 He sat atte sydbenche · and secounde table;
 Cam no wyn in hus wombe³ · thorw the weke longe,
 Nother blankett in hus bed · ne white bred by-fore hym.
 The cause of al thys caitifte⁴ · cometh of meny bisshopes,
 That suffren suche sottes · and othere synnes regne.⁵
 For hit is a carful⁶ knyght · and of a caitif kynges makynge,
 That hath no londre ne lynage riche · ne good loos⁷ of hus hondes.
 The same ich seye for sothe · by suche that ben preestes,
 That han nother konnyng ne kyn · bote a corone⁸ one,
 And a title, a tale of nouht · to hus lifode,⁹ as hit were.
 Vuele ben thei suffred · suche that schenden¹⁰ masses
 Throgh hure luther¹¹ lyuynge · and lewede vnder-stondyng!"¹²

The parallel passage in the B-text has the additional lines,

"I haue wonder for why · and wher-fore the bisshop
 Maketh suche prestes · that lewed men bytrayen."¹³

This is, as M. Jusserand concedes at the outset, "*une question d'appréciation*," as, indeed, are all those that deal with literary "tone and color." To me it seems improbable, almost impossible, that a man so essentially honest as Langland, so indifferent to the opinion of the "fool multitude," so sturdily defiant of the mighty, should yet have openly railed at a custom to which he owed his own position. There is in his work no trace of that bitterness with which small souls are wont to despise the condition from which they have risen. The mention of his poverty is the almost invariable accompaniment of personal allusions, and references to his home are introduced apparently for the express purpose of declaring its humbleness. Although frankly confessing that he himself has little inclination to work, he makes his whole poem a glowing tribute to the dignity of

¹reverend father. ²worked. ³belly. ⁴vileness. ⁵X, 203-210, 242-256.
⁶full of care, wretched. ⁷praise. ⁸crown, tonsure. ⁹livelihood. ¹⁰spoil.
¹¹wicked. ¹²XIV, 110-116. ¹³B. XI, 294 and 295.

honest labor. It was given to one poet to sing for all time

“A man’s a man for a’ that”;

but four hundred years before the Ayrshire plowman, Langland tried to proclaim the message, although, lacking the power of genius, he stammered it haltingly in seven thousand lines instead of shouting it exultantly in forty. Piercing the artistic trappings and penetrating to the great human heart that throbs in both poems, we must ascribe to Langland the same desire to expose the false basis of social aristocracy that moved Burns to sing immortally of that good time coming when

“sense and worth o’er a’ the earth
May bear the gree and a’ that,
* * * * *
When man to man the warld o’er
Shall brithers be for a’ that.”

Nevertheless there seems to me always in Langland’s mention of “bondmen” an undertone of conscious superiority, in his reference to “freemen” an overtone of caste prejudice,—acoustic ghosts to which he himself may easily have been deaf.

The pride of birth is, perhaps, of all forms of the sin once accounted deadly the most alluring. Its foundation is so manifestly a gift of the gods, the “third and fourth generation” clauses can so easily be adduced in its justification, that men, who from very dread of vulgarity despise the grosser and more material forms of pride founded on personal achievements or acquirements, are especially prone to succumb to its enticements, and to cling to it with increased ardor as the other popularly acknowledged sources yield to the gradual attrition of time or the sudden revolutions of fortune. It seems more pardonable, or at least more excusable, when it constitutes the only claim by which a man may judge himself above his brothers. It is to this pride of birth that I attribute the unexpected and apparently incongruous tone of

aristocracy before which the student of the *Vision of Piers Plowman* stands puzzled and baffled, while the casual reader goes on his way blandly reckoning Langland among the reformers and serenely quoting his poem as the chief literary source of the Lollard doctrines and the Peasants' Revolt. I cannot escape the inference that Langland was born a free-man, and that he entered the church by the door regularly appointed rather than by the breach broken by the wolves.¹ The fundamental difference between men is not that of pounds and pence, nor education and ignorance, nor even ancestors and forbears, but that of freedom and slavery. So long as the latter exists in open and material form, it is the duty of the strong to remove the shackles; after that comes the far more difficult task of effecting their own and their brothers' spiritual emancipation. But this is a distinctly modern conception and had no place in medieval thought. Langland stood with the freemen in opposition to the bondmen, but he also stood with the poor in opposition to the rich; hence we find him Janus-like looking both ways, and only careful study of his poem and the contemporary literature can furnish the clue to his apparent inconsistency. With the characteristic stolidity of the English middle class he accepted the existing social system. A king was a national necessity, but he was, in a way, the accident of the throne; that was established and maintained by the grace of God, but

"The muche mygte of the men · made hym to regne,"²

and, to use the words of Conscience,

"'In condicion' * * * 'that thou conne defende

And reule thy reame in reson · right wel, and in treuthe;

Than, that thow haue thyn askyng · as the lawe asketh;

Omnia sunt tua ad defendendum, sed non ad deprehendendum!"³

It was this conception of the kingly office that made it possible for Will, in his character of representative of the

¹ X, 259 ff. ² I, 140. ³ XXII, 479-481.

common people, to address his sovereign in the familiar and even didactic manner that forms one of the marked features not only of this poem but of the contemporary literature. Thus Conscience gives to the king the following daring advice, decorously covered with a veil of Latin :

“*Sum rex, sum princeps · neutrum fortasse deinceps ;
O qui iura regis · christi specialia regis,
Hoc vt agas melius · iustus, et esto pius !
Nudum ius a te · vestiri vult pietate,
Qualia vis metere · talia grana sere ;
Si seritur pietas · de pietate metas.*”¹

Towards the close of the poem, this and much other plain speaking finds its explanation.

“*Spiritus iusticie · spareth nat to spille* *
Hem that beoth gulty · and for to corecte
The kyng, and ³ the kyng falle · in eny thyng gulty.”⁴

Yet this same spirit of justice puts Langland with the conservatives when revolutionary methods are suggested, for this I take to be the interpretation of the famous fable of belling the cat. Accepting 1376-7, the date usually assigned to the composition of the B-text, we find this story incorporated into the poem at a time when the imbecility of Edward III, the death of the Black Prince, and the youth of his son, the heir apparent, combined to make the powerful Duke of Lancaster practically supreme in the kingdom. The people had a not unnatural fear that Lancaster might modify the succession to suit his own interests, and suspicions, menaces, and plots, vague as they were numerous, filled the public ear and disturbed the public mind. A rout of rats and with them small mice more than a thousand, says Langland, came to counsel for their common profit ; for a cat of the court laughed at the rats and played with them perilously, and put them where he liked. Then a rat of renown, most reasonable of

¹ I, 152-157. ² *correct.* ³ *an, if.* ⁴ XXII, 303-305.

tongue, advised to buy a bell of brass or of bright silver and hang it about the cat's neck, that they might hear where he went; and all the rout of the rats to this reason assented. But though the bell was bought, there was not a rat in all the rout, for all the realm of France, that durst bind it about the cat's neck; so all their labor was lost and their long travail. Then a mouse strode forth sternly and stood before them all, and to the rout of the rats rehearsed these words:¹

“Thauh we hadde ycollid² the catte · ȝut sholde ther come another,
 To cracchen³ ous and al oure kynde · thouh we crepe vnder benches.
 For-thi ich consaile, for comune profit · lete the cat worthe,⁴
 And neuere be we so bold · the belle hym to shewe.
 For ich hurde my syre sayn · seuen ȝer passed,
 ‘Ther the cat nys bote a kyton · the court is ful elynge;’⁵
 Witnesse of holy wryt · who so can rede—

Ue terre ubi puer est rex: Salamon.

Ich sigge it for me, quath the mous · ich seo so muchel after,
 Shal neuere the cat ne the kyton · by my consail, be greued,
 * * * * *

For meny mannys malt · we mys wolde distrye,
 And ȝe, route of ratons · of rest men a-wake,
 Ne were the cat of the court · and gonge kytones to-warde;⁶
 For hadde ȝe ratones ȝoure reed · ȝe couthe⁷ nat reulie ȝow-selue.’”⁸

The interpretation is easy:—the Duke of Lancaster is the cat; the heir apparent, afterward Richard II, is the kitten; the rats are the people; and the mouse is Langland himself advising to patience and submission.

In like manner the orthodox doctrine of class distinctions is accepted.

“Lewede men to laborie · and lordes to honte”⁹

is the conveniently alliterative form in which the theory of the social orders is stated. This is more elaborately set forth in the preceding passus:

¹ I., 165–198. ² killed. ³ scratch. ⁴ be. ⁵ wretched. ⁶ present. ⁷ could.

⁸ I., 199–207, 212–215. ⁹ X., 223.

"‘Sykerliche,¹ syre knygt’ · seide Peers thenne,
 ‘Ich shal swynke and swete · and sowe for us bothe,
 And laboure for the while thou lyuest · al thy lyf-tyme,
 In couenaunt that thou kepe · holy kirke and my-selue
 Fro wastours and wyckede men · that this worlde struen.²
 And go honte hardiliche³ · to hares and to foxes,
 To bores and to bockes · that breketh a-doune menne hegges;⁴
 And faite⁵ thy faucones · to culle wylde foules;
 For thei comen to my croft · my corn to defoule.’
 Corneysliche the knygt then · comsede these wordes;
 ‘By my power, Peers · ich plyghte the my treuthe,
 To defende the in faith · fyghte thauh ich sholde.’ ”⁶

The verses following contain an ideal of knighthood, less artistic but not less exalted than Chaucer’s.

“‘And gut on⁷ poynt,’ quath Peers · ‘ich praye gow ouermore;
 Loke ge tene no tenaunt · bote yf Treuth wolle assente,
 Whenne ge amercyn eny man · let Mercy be taxour,
 And Meknesse thy maister · maugre Mede chekes.⁸
 Thauh poure men profre gou · presentes and giftes,
 Nym⁹ hit nat, an aunter¹⁰ · thow mowe hit nat deserue;
 For thow shalt gulde,¹¹ so may be · and somdel a-bygge.¹²
 Mys-beede¹³ nouht thy bondemen · the bet¹⁴ may thou spede;
 Thauh he be here thyn vnderling · in heuene, paraunter¹⁵
 He worth rather¹⁶ receyued · and reuerentloker¹⁷ sette;
 At church in the charnel · cheorles aren vuel to knowe,
 Other a knyght fro a knaue · other a queyne¹⁸ fro a queene.¹⁹
 Hit by-cometh to a knyght · to be curteys and hende,²⁰
 Trewe of hys tonge · tales loth to huyre,
 Bote thei be of bounte · of batailes and of treuthe.
 Hald nat of harlotes · huyre nat here tales,
 Nameliche atte mete · suche men eschewe;
 Hit ben the deueles disours²¹ · to drawe men to synne.
 Contreplede nat conscience · ne holy kirke ryghtes.’ ”²²

A familiar note is struck in these lines. The extravagance of the rich, the merit of the poor, the levelling of death,—

¹ surely. ² destroy. ³ boldly. ⁴ hedges. ⁵ tame. ⁶ IX, 23-34. ⁷ one.
⁸ in spite of Meed's cheeks, i. e. in spite of all that Meed can do. ⁹ take. ¹⁰ lest
 peradventure. ¹¹ repay. ¹² suffer for it. ¹³ injure. ¹⁴ better. ¹⁵ peradventure.
¹⁶ sooner. ¹⁷ more reverently. ¹⁸ quean. ¹⁹ queen. ²⁰ kind. ²¹ story-tellers.
²² IX, 35-53.

these are the strings on which satire has harped since the beginning of literature. The Christian doctrine of immortality produced a new variation, and enabled the imagination to pass the bounds of this life and to ascribe to heaven the justice that earth failed to show. The *Vision* is full of such passages :

"Clerkus and knyghtes · carpen¹ of god ofte,
And haueth hym muche in hure mouthe · ac mene men in herte."²

"And alle the wise that euere were · by ouht ich can asprie,
Preiseide pouerte for beste · yf pacience hit folwe,
And bothe bettere and blessedere · by meny folde than richesse;
Thauh hit be sour to suffre · ther cometh a swete after."³

"Myschiefs and myshappes · and menye tribulacions
By-tokneth ful treweliche · in tyme comynge after
Murthe fur hus mornynge · and that muche plente.
For Crist seide to hus seyntes · that for hus sake tholeden⁴
Pouerte and penaunce · and persecucion of body,
Schullen haue more worschipe to wages · [and worthier ben yholde]
Than angeles—in here angre⁵ · on this wise hem grette,

'Tristitia uestra uertetur in gaudium':

Loure sorwe in-to solas · shal turne atte laste,
And out of wo in-to wele · goure wyrdes⁶ shul chaunge."⁷

"Thauh men rede⁸ of riche · ryght to the worldes ende,
I wist neuere renke⁹ that riche was · that whan he rekne sholde,
And whan he drouh¹⁰ hym to the deth · that he ne dradde¹¹ hym sarrer
Than eny poure pacient · * * * * *
* * * * *

Many man hath hus Ioye here · for alle here wel dedes,
And lordes and ladyes ben callid · for leodes¹² that thay haue,
And slepith, as hit semeth · and somere euere hem foleweth;
Whan deth a-waketh hem of here wele · that were here so ryche,
Than aren hit pure poure thynges · in purgatorie other in helle!"¹³

"Thei that haue hure hyre by-fore · aren eueremore poure,
And shulle nat deye out of dette · to dyne er they deseruen hit.
Whan here deuer¹⁴ is don · and his daies iourne,

¹ talk. ² XII, 52 and 53. ³ XIII, 140-143. ⁴ suffered. ⁵ trouble. ⁶ destinies. ⁷ XIII, 201-209. ⁸ talk. ⁹ man. ¹⁰ drew. ¹¹ dreaded. ¹² possessions. ¹³ XVI, 284-287, 305-309. ¹⁴ duty.

Then may men wite what he is worth · and what he hath deserued;
And nouht to fonge¹ by-fore · for drede of disalouwyng.

So ich say by gow riche · hit semeth² nat ȝe shulle

Haue two heuenes · for ȝoure her-beynge.

* * * * *

The ryche is yreuerenced · by reson of his richesse,

There the poure is yput by-hynde · and can³ parauntre more

Of wit and of wysedome · that fer wey is bettere

Than richesse other reaulte⁴ · and rather yhurde in heuene.

For the ryche hath muche to rekene · and ryȝt softe walkith

The heye wey to-heuene-warde; · he halt⁵ hit nat ful euene;

Ther the poure presseth by-fore · with a pak at hus rygge,⁶

Batauntlyche,⁷ as beggers don · and boldeliche he craueth,

For hus pouerte and pacience · perpetual Ioye.”⁸

The inference seems clear that Langland belonged to that noble army who made Christian socialism a force before it became a name; but again the student must shun the broad road that leads the casual reader to conclusions. The first fact demanding attention is that these excessive praises of poverty and elaborate arguments against riches were part of the literary conventionality of the age. Derived primarily from Stoic philosophy and moulded by Latin satire, they received a new impress from Christianity, and, disseminated by the general popularization of literature in the middle ages, played an important rôle in the social and religious reforms of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Significant as was their effect upon the increasing number of people who read them, they must not be regarded too seriously as arguing an author's sympathy with the classes they champion, unless other facts can be adduced to confirm this position. Such facts are not wanting in the case of Langland; the democratic tone and tendency of his poem strike all readers and are commented upon by all critics. Nevertheless we cannot entirely clear him from the charge of conventionality. His long laudations of the poor and his pious exhortations to the rich not only weary us, but—a sin less easily condoned—they some-

¹ receive. ² is seemly, befits. ³ knows. ⁴ royalty. ⁵ considers. ⁶ back.

⁷ hastily. ⁸ XVII, 3-9, 49-57.

times ring false, and they usually convince us that the author is aware of their literary value. Langland delighted to dream of another life where the last of this world should be accounted first, but he quickly resented any attempt to begin the reversal on this side of the grave. Like many good Christians of a time later than his own, he considered heaven a convenient place for the solution of problems too dangerous for earth. We have seen his attitude toward the custom that threatened the aristocracy of the clergy. He makes a somewhat similar protest against granting freedom to retail dealers, a class who provoked his sharpest satire :

“For thees men doth most harme · to the mene puple,
 Richen thorw regratrye¹ · and rentes² hem byggen³
 With that the poure puple · sholde putten in hure womben;
 For toke they on triweliche · they tymbrid⁴ nat so heyne,
 Nother bouhten hem burgages⁵ · be ge ful certayn.

* * * * *

For-thy mayres that maken free men · me thynketh that thei ouhten
 For to spure⁶ and aspye · for eny speche of seluer
 What manere mester⁷ · other merchaundise he vsede,
 Er he were vnder-fonge free · and felawe in goure rolles.
 Hit ys nogt semly forsoth · in cyte ne in borwton,⁸
 That vsurers other regratours⁹ · for eny kynne gyftes,
 Be franchised for a free man · ank haue a fals name.”¹⁰

These seem to me the natural expressions of a man jealous to guard the exclusiveness of his own rank at a time when money and business success were claiming the social recognition hitherto accorded only to free birth and gentle inheritance. It was an inevitable result of the increasing prominence of the merchant class that all trade to the last degree of haberdashery should share in its elevation ; it was also inevitable that the aristocracy should resent the intrusion. Although we cannot consider Langland an aristocrat according to the ordinary standards, yet his pride of free birth, his consciousness of mental superiority, his “benefit of clergy” roused in

¹ retail dealing. ² rents, income. ³ buy, produce. ⁴ built. ⁵ tenements.
⁶ enquire. ⁷ trade. ⁸ borough (town). ⁹ retail dealers. ¹⁰ IV, 81-85, 108-114.

him a truly aristocratic scorn of those whose success was measured by their ability to buy cheap and sell dear.

On the other hand, he ranks himself with the common people in his complaints against the rich. In so far as these have a personal element and are not mere conventionalities, they seem to me the protest of a man who, from the under side, felt the pressure of social inequalities and rebelled against them. To a person gifted with eyes to see and a mind to understand the worth of a man, there is necessarily something irritating in the popular conception of money as a determinant of social position. In Langland's eyes, which with proto-Puritanic zeal sought always moral aspects, money could be only a talent to be invested for the glory of God and the benefit of humanity. He is consequently unsparing in his denunciation of the reckless rich and persistent in his assertion of the essential equality of all Christians.

I am aware that this view of his character is inconsistent with the one previously advanced; but consistency is about the last quality that a student of human nature expects in a man, and to a degree unusual even in personally discursive literature Langland's book is himself. He withdrew from the crowd; his world—intensely local and temporal, essentially English and medieval, but yet the world—swept past in solemn review, and he wrote it; he saw visions of the fate to which it was hastening, and he wrote them; he dreamed dreams of the glory to which it might attain, and he wrote them; and then the contrast between the actual, the probable, and the possible struck out from his gloomy spirit a flame of words—prophecy, denunciation, protest, exhortation, pleading—and he wrote them all. Lost to the world as a personality, not a fact of his history unquestionably established, he lives in his book, at once tender and fierce, yielding and defiant, conservative and radical, aristocrat and democrat, orthodox and liberal, but withal a vital, natural, and familiar character; and there can be no consistent estimate of the

work that does not recognize this fundamental inconsistency of the writer.

Its most marked manifestation is found in the treatment of the multitude *infra classem*. Moved by an undoubtedly honest sympathy with the lower social orders, Langland wrote his poem with an evident desire to prove the superiority of Christian character to all creeds, systems, and conventionalities; and by choosing a plowman as his exemplar of ideal manhood he incidentally extolled the dignity of labor. The times were ripe for the work. The years covered by the three texts of the *Vision* comprise the period of the most important labor agitation that England has ever known:—established systems were crumbling; inherited prejudices were weakening; ancient barriers were breaking; and a seething, turbulent, unformed mass, stirred from the dregs of the nation, was bursting through the crust of conventionality and hurling itself into a society that hitherto had had no place and now had no welcome for it. Here was the opportunity for a man with the theories that Langland cherished to utter his clearest tones, to speak his bravest words, to voice the needs and the claims of this new force; and here as elsewhere we have to bridge the gulf between his theories and his practice.

There is common to the three texts a reference to the discontent of the laborers, slightly covered by a thin veil of allegory;¹ there is also common to the two later texts a more elaborate allegorical account of the disturbances subsequent to the Black Death.² Mainly from these passages we learn our author's attitude toward the most significant events of his time; and we find in them no word of encouragement, no expression of sympathy, no hint that this movement was aught but evil in its origin and pernicious in its tendency. We read the old story, the burden of the prophets of endless

¹ A. VII, 105-311; B. VI, 114-332; C. IX, 119-355.

² B. XX, 79-178; C. XXIII, 80-179.

generations :—the sins of the people have roused the wrath of God, and calamities have fallen upon the children of men. From sheer wantonness laborers became “wasters,” and in wandering over the country corrupted others, until a season of famine drove them back to their work.¹ Even then they despised their former condition, and, being most unnaturally affected by the increasing luxury of the upper classes, wearied of their old diet of dry bacon and half-penny ale, and desired to fare daintily.² They ignorantly scorned the counsel of “courteous Cato,” “*paupertatis onus pacienter ferre memento*,”³ and rebelled against the laws by which the king and all the king’s justice repeatedly tried to fix the price of labor according to obsolete standards.⁴ Finally the social and ecclesiastical conditions became so bad that Conscience called upon Kynde, who sent forth an army of diseases, and

“Deth cam dryuyng after · and al to douste paschte⁵
 Kynges and knyghtes · caysers and popes ;
 Lered ne lewde · he lefte no man stande ;
 That he hitte euene · sterede neuere after.
 Many a louely lady · and here lemmanes⁶ knyghtes
 Sounede⁷ and swelte⁸ · for sorwe of Dethes dyntes.”^{9” 10}

When Conscience begged Kynde to cease,

“Fortune gan flaterie thenne · thaym fewe that were a-lyue”¹¹

and sent Lechery and gathered a great host against Conscience. Covetousness arose

“And cam to kynges consail · as a kene¹² baroun,
 And knockede Conscience · in court by-fore hem alle,
 And gerte¹³ Goode-Faith to flee · and Fals to a-byde.”¹⁴

Then Life laughed aloud and took Fortune for his mistress and begat Sloth, who wedded Wanhope.^{15 16}

¹ IX, 122-204.

² IX, 326-335.

³ IX, 338.

⁴ IX, 340 and 341. Statutes of Laborers, &c., 1349, 1350, 1376, &c.

⁵ dashed. ⁶ lovers. ⁷ swooned. ⁸ died. ⁹ blows. ¹⁰ XXIII, 100-105.

¹¹ XXIII, 110. ¹² bold. ¹³ made. ¹⁴ XXIII, 129-131. ¹⁵ Despair.

¹⁶ XXIII, 80-160.

I have said that I consider Langland unwilling to push his reflections on religious and ecclesiastical questions to their logical conclusions; in regard to social matters he seems to me unable to see the inevitable result. I do not forget that to the eyes of a contemporary a movement shows a blur of details and personalities which the years remove, leaving its course clearly defined to the view of posterity; but granting all that his own beloved "*spiritus iusticie*" can demand, we must yet acknowledge that we here confront a limitation of our author's character that seriously impairs the literary and sociological effectiveness of his poem. Earnestly desiring the good of the nation and especially of that portion generally considered least worthy of attention, he was honestly incapable of appreciating or even understanding a movement destined to revolutionize rather than modify existing customs. In the passages referring to social questions there is no hasty interpolation of the saving clause, no reiteration of orthodoxy, no abrupt turn lest advance should become dangerous; at every pause, in truly national spirit, he chants the refrain,

"As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be;"—

but after this world? Oh then, unity, equality, communism, what you will, if only it does not begin now!

If these interpretations be correct, how are we to account for the influence that the *Vision* exerted in social and religious reforms? Forty-five manuscripts still in existence, most of them plainly written and devoid of illumination, testify to its popularity among the middle classes on its first appearance. The Protestant reformers read in it prophecy as well as encouragement, and circulated it widely in the rude prints of the sixteenth century, three editions, according to report, being published about the year 1550. The name of "*Piers Plowman*" was proverbial in complaints and lamentations for two hundred years, and became identified with many diverse and contradictory reforms. Unconscious of their cost,

Langland took his first steps, and a constantly increasing multitude followed in his path. When their leader stopped, they still swept on; the road lay before them, stretching into a far country which even the clearest eyes could not plainly discern. All the inconsistency and conservatism with which Langland hedged his path were trodden under foot by these impetuous followers. The shout of their own voices raised in reiteration of his complaints made them deaf to his warnings and expostulations. They accepted his premises and ignored his conclusions; and, armed with weapons torn from his own arsenal, they flung themselves into a conflict from which it had been his main purpose to restrain them.

ELIZABETH DEERING HANSCOM.